

Stepping Into the Expansive Worlds of Black Imagination

The curator of “In the Black Fantastic” at London’s Hayward Gallery describes it as a “feel-good show about death,” which also looks beyond Afrofuturism.

By **Charlotte Jansen**

Published Aug. 4, 2022 Updated Aug. 18, 2022

LONDON — In a sedate northwest suburb of London, in the 1970s, Ekow Eshun and his brother spent their free time in their bedroom, poring over Marvel Comics. Among their favorites were the X-Men, relaunched in 1975 as a racially diverse team of mutants.

Elsewhere in visual culture, not to mention on the streets of London, “our presence as Black people in Britain was treated with skepticism and hostility,” Eshun, now 54 and a curator and writer, said in a recent phone interview.

In the fantastical universe of these superheroes, Eshun — whose parents are Ghanaian — found not escape, but a way to rationalize his experiences. “I never got over the strangeness of a racialized society that defines people of color as inferior — that is a science-fictional state,” he said.



Rashaad Newsome’s video collage “Build or Destroy” from 2021 splices together his photographs of Black queer bodies and consumer goods. Rashaad Newsome; via Jessica Silverman Gallery

Exploring alternative worlds as a way of understanding one’s own is at the heart of “In the Black Fantastic,” an exhibition curated by Eshun that is currently on view at London’s Hayward Gallery. The show brings together a taut selection of work from established artists from the African diaspora, all born between 1959 and 1989, presented as episodic solo presentations that unfold like a labyrinth of varied environments.

The first of these is a series of dazzling works by Nick Cave responding to acts of violence in the United States. It includes a collection of Cave’s “Soundsuits,” the full-body costumes he began making in 1992 after seeing televised footage of the police beating of Rodney King. The exhibit’s “Soundsuit 9:29” is a new ensemble dedicated to George Floyd (the title is a reference to the length of time the former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd’s neck). Majestic in scale and exquisitely crafted, the Soundsuits contend with being both hypervisible and unseen — particularly as a Black person in any white-dominant society



In the first room of the exhibition, a new commission from Nick Cave, "Chain Reaction," left, shares space with examples of his "Soundsuits." Zeinab Batchelor, via Hayward Gallery



Ekow Eshun, the show's creator, sees the Black Fantastic as "a way of seeing shared by artists conjuring new visions of Black possibility." Zeinab Batchelor



Cave's "Soundsuit 9:29" is a new ensemble dedicated to George Floyd. via Hayward Gallery

Cutting through Cave's space is a dramatic new commission titled "Chain Reaction." Extending from ceiling to floor, chains of black resin casts of Cave's forearm grasp on to one another, fragments connecting to create a feeling of wholeness, which reverberates throughout the rest of the exhibition.

From Cave's works, the exhibition extends over two more floors and across 10 more artists' imaginations. Ralph Rugoff, the Hayward's director, called "In the Black Fantastic" a "landmark" exhibition, one that brings together artists under this umbrella for the first time in Britain. Eshun shied away from calling the Black Fantastic a movement, defining it as "a way of seeing shared by artists conjuring new visions of Black possibility." But the exhibition still heralds a new chapter in the ways contemporary art approaches race and culture.

It is poignant that such a statement is being made in London, a city that was once the engine of Britain's slave trade and its colonial rule of African countries, and one that is still reckoning with that legacy. Hew Locke, another artist featured in the exhibition, said "you couldn't have done a show like this, here, 20 years ago."



Ellen Gallagher's work "Ecstatic Draught of Fishes," 2021. Gallagher is one of several artists in the exhibition whose work has been associated with Afrofuturism. Ellen Gallagher; via Hauser & Wirth; Tony Nathan

Some of the artists included in the exhibition — notably Kara Walker, Wangechi Mutu and Ellen Gallagher — have previously been associated with Afrofuturism, a movement that emerged in the United States in the 1990s. Coined by the writer Mark Dery in his 1993 essay “Black to the Future,” Afrofuturism fuses science-fiction, technology and fantasy to explore the concerns and ancestry of the African diaspora, centered on the African-American experience. (Eshun’s older brother and fellow comic book enthusiast, Kodwo, is an academic who has written extensively about the arts through an Afrofuturist lens.) When work on the exhibition — originally planned for 2021 — began in 2019, Eshun initially planned to explore Afrofuturism. But that movement’s “idea of a future that was born some time ago is antithetical to me,” he said.

Instead, Eshun’s Black Fantastic is an attempt — informed by conversations he had with the exhibition’s artists — to define Black creativity and imagination on its own terms.

His resistance to assigning artists to rigid movements was echoed by Ytasha Womack, the author of “Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,” in a recent interview. Womack said that while Afrofuturism was alive and well, “Black creators want to create without limitations. Some are Afrofuturist. Some are Afrosurreal. Others can be discussed as fantastic. Some are all three.”

Limitations feel far away from Locke’s exhibition space, where his explosively colorful, life-scale studio photographs (2007’s “How Do You Want Me?”) are shown alongside his “Ambassador” sculptures, produced last year: four figures on horseback — approximately two feet tall, dripping with reproductions of racist regalia, slave pennies, colonial medals and lynched figures.



In Hew Locke’s room, the photograph “Serpent of the Nile (Sejant)” (2007), left, hangs alongside the sculpture “Ambassador 2” (2021). Hew Locke/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; via Hayward Gallery; Rob Harris

“It’s understandable that people like me need to create our own world to occupy and control, when in the world outside your control is limited,” Locke, 62, said in a recent phone interview. He grew up in Guyana in the years immediately after the country was freed from colonial rule, when “a past that is dark, bloody and involves slavery and indentureship” was only just out of reach, he said. As a result, “we were aware of other worlds,” he said. “The idea of a parallel world was sort of an ever-present, normal thing.”

Elsewhere in the show, much of Lina Iris Viktor’s work explores the world made possible by Liberia, a nation founded in 1847 by formerly enslaved Africans from the United States. Her commanding mixed media works often focus on female figures pertaining to Liberian mythologies and histories, and question the dangerous allure of utopian representations of dominance and power. For Viktor, one of the younger artists in the exhibition at 35, responding to the idea of a “Black Fantastic” was “sensorial ... it didn’t need further explanation.”



Lina Iris Viktor's "Red/ Meridian," made between 2021-22. Viktor's work explores the world made possible by the country of Liberia. Lina Iris Viktor; via Hayward Gallery

The exhibition's artists share a concern with reinventing, refashioning and remixing, favoring techniques such as assemblage and collage. This innovative spirit is evident in the 24-karat gold Viktor applies to her work, and in the CGI video collages Rashaad Newsome splices together from his photographs of Black queer bodies and consumer goods.

Newsome, an American artist, said his collaboration with Eshun was wholly positive, but that the Black Fantastic wouldn't define his practice. "Curators create containers, and it's my job as an artist to destroy them — that's where we'll always be tussling," said Newsome, 43.

On the third and final floor, Cauleen Smith's installation, "Epistrophy," is a complex arrangement of objects that have personal importance to the artist, which are then reflected and projected by nearby screens and monitors; an apt metaphor for the politics of display.

Laying bare the process of making art to the viewer is important in all of the works in the show. According to Smith, who is American, this transparency conveys a sense of actively "dismantling the world around us." The artists in the show "are actually just using what is already all around us, to show what is possible," she added.

Grounding the work in the substance of reality seems more important in the Black Fantastic than conjecture about a future, especially when the future can be increasingly difficult to imagine. The art of the Black Fantastic is replete with references to historical events that still pierce the present.



On the third and final floor, Cauleen Smith's installation, "Epistrophy," is a complex arrangement of objects that have personal importance to the artist. Cauleen Smith; Los Angeles County Museum of Art

A recent film work by Walker in the exhibition, "Prince McVeigh and the Turner Blasphemies," re-enacts in cut-paper puppets the murder of James Byrd Jr., a Black man who was chained to a pickup truck and dragged to his death along a country road in Texas by three white men in 1998. Many of the works invoke both memory and presence to account for the multiplicity of the Black experience, in which the peril of the past seeps into the everyday. Although Eshun is reluctant to codify the Black Fantastic as a movement, this quality emerges as one of the touchstones of the exhibition.

At its core, the Black Fantastic grapples with a paradox every marginalized community faces: how to acknowledge the "other" as a construct while also celebrating the unique power of difference, and the imagination that pours forth from it. As a result, many of the works exhibited at the Hayward land somewhere between joy and grief, with jubilation and the macabre meeting

in a soaring, melancholy overture.

“I think of this as a feel-good show about death,” Eshun said in an interview at the gallery. “It’s about the fragility of life and the proximity to death, and how physical presence, how aliveness, can be denied through acts of violence, and pervasively through the denial of our humanity.”

He paused, and said: “These are things I think about, walking down the street as a Black person, where it’s not a given you’ll arrive at your destination whole.

“I both wonder and am in awe of artists who can hold some of that history and still evoke beauty and possibility,” he added.